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RUEHRH/AMEMBASSY RIYADH 8209

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SIPDIS

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ECA

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SUBJECT: GOVERNOR OF MECCA ON PROMOTION OF NON-RELIGIOUS
TOURISM, REDEVELOPMENT OF JEDDAH SLUMS, AND TAIF FESTIVAL

REF: 08 JEDDAH 508

Classified By: Martin Quinn for Reasons 1.4(b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: In a January 13 meeting, Governor of the Mekkah Region Prince Khalid Al Faisal lauded the successful hajj, discussed an intention to bolster the tourism sector, and commented on redevelopment plans for unregulated urban slums in Jeddah. The Governor was receptive to post's proposal to organize a US education, culture and commerce festival in Taif during April 2009 similar to the 2008 Abha festival. End summary.

12. (SBU) SUCCESSFUL HAJJ: According to Prince Khalid Al Faisal, the Kingdom hosted upwards of 3 million pilgrims during the 2008 hajj. He emphasized the major logistical challenge of moving huge numbers of people between points all on a single day and suggested that the process will eventually become easier through a new transportation network being developed in Mekkah, including a rail system. He expressed surprise at the high number of Americans (est. 12,000) participating in the most recent pilgrimage(reftel).

13. (C) TOURISM: Lauding tourism as a sector for active development, Prince Khalid claimed that he is trying to promote internal (Saudi) and foreign travel in the Kingdom, drawing a distinction between the kind of tourism that interests him and the "religiously-oriented" travel for hajj and umra. The Governor cited his personal role as a Saudi leader who has encouraged non-religious, mostly internal tourism in the Kingdom.

14. (C) REDEVELOPMENT OF SLUMS: The Governor discussed plans to redevelop the slums of Jeddah which over the years have sprung up illegally on unregulated tracts of land, typically behind and between prominent real estate projects. Prince Khalid said that many of those living in Jeddah slums are hajj/umra illegal over-stayers and their descendants. He spoke of Government help to resettle the slum dwellers so they can remain and work in the Kingdom, but did not elaborate on the specifics of urban renewal, future housing or details of what could be a significant population transfer.

15. (SBU) CULTURE AND COMMERCE FESTIVAL IN TAIF: The CG raised the possibility of organizing a US education, culture and commerce festival in Taif in April 2009 and handed Prince Khalid a proposal to evaluate. The Governor was receptive, taking ownership of the idea and reminding that he himself had proposed the highly successful, well attended 2008 festival in Abha. He said he would give us an answer.

16. (C) COMMENT: Despite casually confident statements by SAG officials about promoting tourism in the Kingdom, the specific feat of attracting foreign and non-Muslim tourists to Saudia Arabia appears a distant prospect as long as obtaining visas is still a major obstacle. Only a few

licensed travel agents in Saudi Arabia cater to small groups of foreign tourists. Non-religious tourism by non-Saudis is not likely to have great impact on the local economy or society. Internal, domestic tourism or tourism by overseas Muslims after completing hajj/umra may have a better chance of picking up momentum in coming years. Post will continue to monitor any movement in plans to redevelop Jeddah slums and will assess whether rights of current inhabitants are being considered. End comment.

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